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ABSTRACT

At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Ontario, a course entitled Developing and Leading High Performing Teams: Theory and Practice is experimenting with a design that surfaces the action/reflection paradox for the purpose of learning how to manage this polarity. Whether the product is defined as services or goods, the general tendency is to view time spent on specific task completion as the only legitimate form of work. In the workplace, an opportunity for reflection on a lived experience increases productive capacity and individual knowledge and skill and results in personal and, sometimes, organizational learning that is transformative. The paradoxical outcome for an organization is a case of slowing down in order to speed up. The course teaches the skills required to engage in reflection during 7 full-day sessions over 13 weeks. In the mornings, theory is introduced experientially and covers the following: phases of team development; team goal-setting, problem-solving, decision-making, communication and conflict management; managing difference; and dealing with intractable problems as polarities. In the afternoons, an almost two-hour meeting of class groups as working teams is followed by a team debrief--a structured reflective opportunity to examine the team's behavior and provide feedback. Stages in learning to engage in quality conversations are lack of awareness; awareness without action; ability to act on awareness, with effort; and ability to hold the polarities and maintain the communication. (Contains 23 references) (YLB)

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MANAGING THE ACTION/REFLECTION POLARITY THROUGH DIALOGUE: A PATH TO TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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[1] The names in the text have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

Work has made us into human doings, rather than human beings. We have learned to be productive, but we have forgotten how to just be. (Lance Secretan, 1996)

The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat. (Lily Tomlin, in Secretan, 1996)

Introduction

It has been said that "the unexamined life is not worth living". Yet, in the current work and educational climate of increasing pressure to produce relentlessly, the most important factor for success has been all but eliminated. This is the ability to create a space for collective reflection, learning, and ultimately personal, organizational, and potentially social, transformation. Our recent research (Laiken, 2001; Laiken, Edge, Friedman & West, forthcoming) has highlighted managing the paradox of task versus process, or action versus reflection, as a critical factor in blocking or conversely, facilitating, transformative learning.

At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, graduate students in our Adult Education specialization, "Workplace Learning and Change", are studying to be change practitioners across work sectors. They are nursing educators, human resource professionals, organization development consultants, community developers, community college teachers and the like. All of them have an interest in transformative learning, and are using their graduate education to experience and learn about this for themselves and their constituents.

In one of the courses that I teach, entitled: *Developing and Leading High Performing Teams: Theory and Practice* (referred to in this paper as "course 1107"), we are experimenting with a particular design that surfaces the action/reflection paradox for the purpose of learning how to manage this polarity. To this framework, each individual brings personal learning goals, as well as holding the mutual goal of helping work teams of all kinds develop towards high performance.

This paper examines the design of the 1107 learning environment, in an effort to shed light on how initiating quality conversations through dialogue helps learners to manage the action/reflection tension, educationally and organizationally. It draws on data from both our recently completed research project, conducted to examine models of organizational learning (Laiken, 2001; Laiken et al, 2001), and from the writings of recent 1107 students in their final papers for the course.

The Problem

At the organizational level, across work sectors, our students agree with our research findings that whether the product is defined as services or goods, the general tendency is to view time spent on specific task completion as the only legitimate form of work. Divergent thinking, although touted as an organizational value with phrases such as

"thinking out of the box", is in reality only barely tolerated, before convergence towards action (or in Nike's terms, "just do it") overrules.

For instance, in one of the organizations from our research (Laiken, 2001, p. 8), a worker notes:

> Oh, they look bored at the meeting, and they don't make notes, and they think, "well, didn't we already discuss this"? So people try to speed up the tempo, you know at the meetings, and it's a good thing, because there's work to do. But on the other hand, it's also a forum where you can think – we need to meet, because there will be issues – you know there are – that we should get a little deeper into..

Abbey, one of our 1107 students, cites another example from her experience with a team of public health nurses:

> The team's dedication to task was quite amazing, in that there did not appear to be concern for the members that had been excluded from the process, or those who were not remotely engaged in completing or discussing the task. The members completing the task were ignoring input from their "advisors" and were carrying on as they saw fit. Most interesting was the fact that the entire team took credit for completing the task, despite the fact that only a third of the team had actually physically engaged in the activity. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

Decades of experience and research in adult learning (Lewin, 1951; Argyris and Schon, 1978; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1994) have convinced educators that an opportunity to reflect on one's lived experience is an absolutely essential component of learning which results in attitudinal and behavioural change. In the workplace, an opportunity for such reflection not only increases productive capacity as well as individual knowledge and skill, but also, in fact, results in personal and sometimes, organizational learning which is transformative.[2] As workers engage in critical, reflective, "quality" conversations about the results of a mutual project and their interactions within it, they not only devise improved approaches for further work, they also explore their own values, assumptions and interpersonal processes. Where an unexamined experience may tend to simply be repeated, a conscious examination of learning from direct experience surfaces distorted assumptions, and has the potential to revise established world views. The paradoxical outcome for an organization is a case of slowing down in order to speed up. Decision-making is improved, effectiveness is increased, and overall productivity and work satisfaction are enhanced through

[2] Transformative learning is defined by Patricia Cranton (1994) as "the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience, or perspectives on the world by means of critical self-reflection" (p. xii).

systematically incorporated periods of collective reflection (Laiken, 2001; Laiken et al, forthcoming; Senge et al, 2000; Argyris, 1990).

One of our research participants in a not-for-profit organization illustrates this approach:

> … and in our template of what we look at in a grant evaluation, one of the questions will be, what has Wealthshare learned? That's one of the questions we ask – and everybody reflects on that. It can be "what have I learned as a program manager working with this project?" or "what has Wealthshare learned?" And Wealthshare may have learned never to fund this kind of project again, or only to look at it a certain way.. (Laiken, 2001, p.11)

and about his experience in course 1107, Edward reflects:

> One of the most important lessons I learned throughout the entire course was the tremendous learning that resulted from the debrief sessions presented. Too often in the context of our families, social groups and work teams, we miss the opportunity to come together to reflect on our experiences. Whether it relates to a task, our interactions with each other, or our understanding, the disclosure and feedback is invaluable in forging stronger relationships based on trust and respect. I was really impressed with the way that we all shared in guiding and leading the discussions, and moving the process forward. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

Nevertheless, the workplace persists in devaluing this activity by using derogatory language such as "mushy" or "touchy-feely", and through maintaining systems, processes and behaviours which relegate critical reflection to an isolated corner, if it is supported at all. As a team member in one of our research sites (Laiken, 2001, p.9) notes:

> …but it does take work, though, I mean, you think about a team – it doesn't just happen on its own. It takes its course – and the problem is, people get so caught up with doing the other work they have to do that they don't take the time to build their team, and so the team work doesn't get improved.

When personality or work-style differences (Kolb, 1984) surface in a team meeting, the pressure to move to task closure reinforces convergent work approaches. The assimilative thinkers who could encourage deeper analysis, or the divergent thinkers who might help expand the possibilities, often play second fiddle to an action orientation which is reinforced by work pressures to make a decision and move on. What is lost in this process is the potential for learning that could both inform future action and expand personal consciousness.

Helen reflects on her own attitude towards process at the start of the 1107 course:

> I personally viewed the frequent "time outs" as being selfish and unproductive to the class goal. I dealt with these feelings by burying my frustrations and made every effort to move the class forward into my task pole. My accommodating behaviour was obvious when I thought I was supporting a distraught member in the task pole by suggesting we "ignore the frequent time outs, as those individuals are just attention-seeking"... I recognized the time that a team project would take, and feared that if we continued to stop and look at our team process, we would run out of time. As a working parent taking two courses, I valued the task time, and was resistant to seeing value in the process.

Additionally, when one considers the fact that the skills involved in critical reflection are not as valued, and therefore taught or practiced minimally in the action-oriented workplace, it is not surprising that these skills are generally under-developed among workers, regardless of personal style differences. Thus, although the need for balance between "task" and "process" is sometimes recognized, the implementation is fraught with difficulties.

One of the key barriers is a disinclination to engage in open dialogue that holds the potential for conflict. Inevitably, as a group of people begins to examine together a shared work experience, the differences that define their uniqueness will surface. In an earlier study (Laiken, 1993) conducted with senior managers, team leaders and members from two private-sector organizations, we found that "an intellectual understanding does not appear to be sufficient. No matter how much it is accepted that surfacing and managing conflict is a normal, healthy productive process in a team's life, most team members and leaders appear to be frightened of the outcomes and disinclined to engage" (p.33).

In our more recent research (Laiken, 2001, p.19), a participant comments on the same challenge:

> There's that level of frustration with differences – either with their fellow coordinators in their area, or with their Program Managers, you know, that they feel they can't address it in that way and be open with each other. I mean, I don't think they're afraid of saying it – but I think they feel that it's not going to get resolved, anyway.

Reflecting on the issue of conflict within the 1107 context, Yolande says:

> The team experience, especially the group facilitation with Barbara, helped me discover a part of me that prefers to avoid conflict. If the conflict is of the more factual and neutral nature, I am not afraid to deal with it openly, and I am able to listen to others and build on others' opinions. But if the conflict is more personal, relating to people's feelings, personality, or has a moral or ethical element to it, I tend to avoid it. I still

> remember the horror I felt when the conflict between Kyle and Margaret broke open. I was totally petrified. My hands and feet were cold, my cheeks were burning, and I just wished that it was a misunderstanding and it would pass swiftly without a trace. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

A Graduate Course Response to the Challenge

How then do we, as adult educators, enable reflective opportunities that have potential learning outcomes to be incorporated into productivity-oriented workplace settings? And how do we personally learn the skills required to engage in such reflection, so that we may teach them to others? These are key questions which have surfaced in course 1107 over the years. Our Adult Education graduate students engage in this inquiry experientially, through a course design which unfolds during seven full-day sessions over a period of thirteen weeks.

The first day is devoted to orienting the learners to the course design, beginning to build the group of twelve people as a team, and introducing Blanchard and Hersey's Situational Leadership Model (1988) as a skeletal framework from which to build the theoretical component of the course.

At the end of the first meeting, the students form co-facilitating pairs for each of the remaining six days. The course design then proceeds as follows.

In the mornings, theory is introduced experientially, covering such areas as the phases of team development; team goal-setting, problem-solving, decision-making, communication and conflict management; managing difference; and dealing with intractable problems as polarities. These pieces are initially introduced and taught by the instructor; however, the content is eventually determined by the interests and learning needs of all class participants, and often involves guest lecturers, films, site visits, and simulated experiences.

The afternoon session is divided into two components. The first is an hour and three-quarter meeting of the class group as a working "team", led by the co-facilitating pairs of students chosen during the first class. The task, process and facilitation of these meetings is entirely decided by the members, who are also asked to determine a method for evaluating their progress as a team in all of these areas. The outcome of this evaluation is worth 50% of each student's grade. The instructor acts as a "coach" to the co-facilitators prior to and during the team sessions, if needed. Otherwise she simply observes, collecting data to help with the next segment.

The final hour of the day is devoted to a team "debrief", initially facilitated by the instructor, and eventually co-led by all team members. This segment is intended to provide a structured reflective opportunity to examine the team's behaviour and provide individual feedback to members and co-facilitators. The observations of "team life" are intentionally related back to theoretical concepts introduced in the morning sessions. The

overall goal is to help students learn the skills of successfully achieving task goals through action, while maintaining an effective team process through reflection.

Sarah comments on the impact of this part of the course design:

> The debrief for this session offered many insights into appropriate leadership for this stage. For example, the co-facilitators had prepared an agenda but had realized just before the session that it was too structured, so discarded it.This was a good decision, because it allowed the group members to have more control over the session, thereby sharing the power. The co-facilitators felt like they couldn't offer ideas or suggestions because the group quickly rejected them. As the session continued, they realized that they could facilitate in a less directive way by asking questions to clarify, recording what the group members were saying, and by paraphrasing or summarizing our thoughts and ideas. Because the co-facilitators adjusted their leadership style to be less directive, the group was able to air our differences and work through our issues. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

The path to this kind of awareness is a dialogic approach intended to encourage quality conversations. Learners practice the skills required to engage successfully in dialogue, including advocating their own views, as well as inquiring into the views of others, with the intention of promoting understanding of differences (Elinor and Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1993; Brenegan, 2000). They are introduced to such concepts as "the ladder of inference" (Senge, 1990, Argyris and Schon, 1978), to help them manage the tendency to leap from observed behaviour to undiscussed interpretations and assumptions. They practice the skills of self-disclosure and giving and receiving feedback on observable behaviour (Luft, 1970), and are encouraged to see conflict and expression of difference as a rich opportunity for learning (Laiken, 1994).

About this experience, Sharon says:

> The team enabled a dialogue process to occur by creating a safe, "holding" environment for our discussion. From the early stages of our team development, we had established a supportive, accepting climate for our meetings. Our discussion regarding the selection of a team grade occurred within the protective container our team had built. This container had the capacity to hold the diversity within our team. Opposing views were welcomed as an essential contribution, each worthy of consideration. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

The face to face interaction in class is supported by several additional vehicles for reflection, which help reinforce the experiential learning approach These include a course requirement that each student maintain a personal reflective journal of his or her experience; a learning partnership which is formed early in the course and used in any

way the learners choose; and a web-site (Web Knowledge Forum) which is available for on-line conversations between classes.

Yolande says:

> The whole experience is an excellent example of the power of experiential learning. Even though we were given the theories before we experienced each stage of our team development, those theories only resided in our head, or even worse, in our notes. Only when we had the experience, and reflected on the experience, did those theories start to become real in our hearts. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

Learning to engage in quality conversations

Though, clearly, course 1107 has an impact, the question still remains about how this is achieved. In an earlier article (Laiken, 1997), I introduced a variation of Bandura's (1974) behavioural theory model. It helps to examine the various stages of learning through which an individual or group might progress, to enable the kind of collective reflection described in the last section. I have become aware of the fact that this is exactly the process that my 1107 students experience in class and exemplify in their workplaces, as they and their colleagues learn the art and practice of dialogue.

The stages are as follows:

1. *Lack of awareness* (unconscious incompetence): *in which differences in ideas, styles, approaches, commitment, etc. may cause discomfort, but there is no expectation that it is possible to address this within the work/learning context.*

Edward reflects on his behaviour at this stage, where he is willing to disclose his concerns in his journal, but is not yet willing to raise them in the team context:

> I was not always forthright about how I felt at particular times when I could have provided the team with disclosure and constructive feedback. In my journal, I had written about specific instances when I had concerns or avoided certain team members whenever we separated into smaller groups. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

In describing this phase within a community service team, Evelyn says:

> … there are conflicts between some professional groups about roles, and some team members have reacted to these and other issues through absenteeism and a general lack of enthusiasm for the task at hand. There are also no established expectations that these issues be discussed in geographic teams or by the entire staff at a large group meeting, when they surface. Team members tend to talk about the issues outside of the group format, which might help to alleviate some frustration, but does not

> provide the team with the ability to move forward. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

and Catherine exemplifies this stage through an experience with her financial institution's marketing team:

> I proposed a specific redistribution of work and attempted to open up a discussion on how this would redefine many of our existing working relationships, particularly since I explicitly tried to develop some interdependencies. When I solicited group input on the redefinition of roles, I think (members) were agreeing with me in a deferential way, rather than sharing their real opinions. Although I could discern that this was a mode of working together with which the group members appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable, no one challenged me on it. In fact, no one seemed to want to talk about it with me at all. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

2. *Awareness without action* (conscious incompetence): *in which there is an awareness of issues needing to be discussed more openly, but neither the willingness nor the ability to make these discussible in the work/learning context.*

A transcript of a conversation from Vanessa's recent nursing team meeting provides an example of this stage in the workplace:

> As we simmered down a little, Merilyn asked, "So how do we get into this muck? I know we do it, but here we are – nurses, with supposedly great interpersonal skills, grand communication skills and lots of ability for active listening. Where do we go wrong?"
>
> "Well, I think we may be able to listen and empathize, but I think we are not so skilled at giving feedback and talking clearly about our experiences. That's not what they teach you in nursing, at least not when I graduated!" Dorothy interjected, "Yes if someone says something weird or off-base at team, people just shut up or change the subject. We're not really good at clarifying, especially something that is contentious". "Or something that upsets us", added Anne. "We are much more likely to talk about it after the meeting in small groups". "Yes", said Merilyn, "and that's where it really can start to get out of hand". (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

The work at these two levels involves helping people to invite feedback on the impact of their behaviour on others; helping them explore the assumptions that are driving this behaviour; and helping them be open to having these assumptions questioned by others who bring a different perspective to the table. The impact of this type of engagement is to prevent trips up the previously mentioned "ladder of inference" (Senge et al, 1994):

- from observable data gleaned from experiences with each other
- to "data" that we select from what we observe

- to personal and cultural meanings that we add
- to assumptions we make based on those meanings
- to conclusions we draw rooted in our assumptions
- to beliefs we adopt or generalizations that we make
- to actions we take, based on those beliefs.

The next stage is:

3. *The ability to act on awareness, with effort* (conscious competence)*: in which a group is able, possibly with facilitative help, to surface and expose assumptions in order to more openly explore differences.*

In this phase, learners prevent their trip up the ladder of inference by becoming more aware of their own thinking and reasoning through critical reflection, and begin to engage with each other in quality conversations through dialogue. This involves slowing down their thought processes so that they avoid moving quickly from the concrete data of direct observation to a generalization that is not tested. They learn to spot these leaps because they often cause confusion and tension in a conversation. At this point, rather than ignoring the tension, they learn to acknowledge the leap, and examine it by testing their understandings against the experience of others.

Learners start to recognize that it is possible to make their thinking more accessible by advocating clearly their own reasoning, while at the same time actively inquiring into the reasoning of the others with whom they are in dialogue. The outcome is an exploration of complex issues from many points of view, while suspending assumptions by making them discussible.

Reflecting on her experience with this process in 1107, Tess says:

> During our fifth meeting a team member declared: "I don't look forward to coming to this class and I don't know why." That moment held an indescribable intensity in the team. There was a tension in the room broken briefly by the entry of team members who arrived after the conversation began. As the conversation continued, conflicting views and feelings surfaced. I felt the energy begin to shift. The team allowed the space for working through internal and interpersonal conflicts. The collective strength and vulnerabilities of the team began to surface, as individuals shared responsibility for leadership on specific issues. In these moments I began to feel part of a dialogue – with myself and in the group.

Once the differences have surfaced and are understood clearly by all, the last phase of the model becomes relevant. This is:

4. *The ability to hold the polarities, and maintain the communication* (unconscious competence): *which involves the ability to interact with others who have qualitatively different views, styles, backgrounds, etc. in a way that values the other individuals*

> *and their ideas, while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of one's own beliefs, and allowing oneself to be influenced by the differences.*

As is almost always the case in complex interactions, the issues on the table here are not problems to solve, but polarities to manage. It is likely that a variety of viewpoints will all be potentially credible, while at the same time seeming contradictory. It is in creating a container to hold these differences, and through them to clarify and revise one's own thinking, that the potential for transformation occurs.

In observing her 1107 team experiencing this stage, Alysson notes:

> The facilitators and team members performed well together, demonstrating: a high level of self-confidence on the whole; self-control by allowing everyone to speak and ensuring that all were heard; trustworthiness by agreeing to assign our team/individual relative scores individually; adaptability by Johanna in allowing our proposed tool to be modified; conflict management by at least attempting to address the issues raised by Edward and Jessica about the team versus individual scoring; and leadership on the part of the facilitators by providing a framework for the process by using the tool. I was able to step in as necessary when direction was needed to finalize the decisions. As I am sometimes reluctant to step in due to fear of appearing too forward, this action proved effective in bringing the discussion to a close. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

About her own learning at this point in the course, Alysson reflects:

> In that situation, I was able to move from my usual take-action approach to demonstrating sufficient self-control to be silent when I could not offer anything to change the mood, and wait for either someone else's contribution or inspiration for an alternative action by me to shift the discussion to resolution. It gave me more confidence to step back in similar situations in the future, and trust that others will take the lead. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

In her final paper, Sharon describes how her class team progressed through all four stages within a few weeks:

> The first barrier to effective team functioning occurred after our fourth team meeting. Following the session, half of the team met at a restaurant across the street from the school. Emotions ran high. Some of the team members were deeply disturbed by our team's performance. Several individuals who were not present were labeled as disruptive to our team process and identified as barriers to achieving our expected team outcomes. (*stage 1*)

> As a group, we eventually realized that we were responsible for creating the barrier to our team functioning. What could be more damaging to our team development than holding this "gripe" session, labeling team members and raising conflict issues with only half of the team present? We recognized that the only way this barrier could be broken was to address the areas of conflict with the group as a whole at our next team meeting. (*stage 2*)
>
> Fortunately, at the next meeting, with support from each other, the team facilitators and the teacher, the team members who were struggling with conflict were able to articulate their issues and successfully resolve them within the team. (*stage 3*)
>
> Following this, as a group we reaffirmed our commitment to our team norm of honesty, and the need for each member to call for a "time out" to examine our process when s(he) was experiencing a barrier to team functioning. (*stage 4*)

Conclusion

In our 1107 course, as in the "learning organizations" of our research (Laiken et al, forthcoming), learners and workers have struggled in their own way with the action/reflection paradox. The class teams and organizations that have been able to actually balance their task and process activities, and include reflective opportunities in the course of a work/learning day, are beginning to demonstrate the ability to manage difference in new ways.

About one of her learnings from 1107, Sharon says:

> Embracing the concept that managing polarities helps achieve the positive synergy offered by both extremes, represented a shift in my understanding of teamwork. Originally, I approached the experience with a "task accomplishment" focus. This approach had worked well for me in previous courses. Now I had come to realize that the best results were accomplished by managing the positive aspects of both polarities. Without the benefits offered by the team members who were more process oriented, our team performance would be less rich.

Those workplaces that value mutual reflection as much as action, and educate members in the approaches required to reflect skillfully, not only creatively solve work-related problems, but also became a seat of "action learning" (Revans, 1982). In the end, I believe it is this notion of learning on the job through quality conversations which holds a promise of personal and organizational transformation. Our graduate students are learning, through courses like 1107, to help create such work environments.

> As I read the transcripts from the taping of class six, I can now see how the class used honesty, balance between task and process, respect for each other, and effective communication (our class norms) to become unstuck and accept the diversity in the class. We moved from the stuck position to a position that valued the benefits of the polarities of task and process. The synergy and enthusiasm within the class was positive and inclusive. We had valued and celebrated both sides of the poles of task and process, and it felt great. (Helen, final paper, course 1107, 2001).

> I also changed my self-evaluation on "guiding group discussion: keeping the group on track" from "I can do this very well" to "I need to learn more". Through the team experience, I learned that to keep the group on track does not mean urging them to make decisions quickly and appearing to be efficient. A crucial skill to help the group stay on track is to create space and time for group members to reflect on the here and now, to pay attention to the process and relationships, and to reach higher quality decisions in the end. I learned that in this process, the two most necessary leadership attributes are patience and confidence, which allow the leader to attend to the process of here and now without losing sight of the ultimate goal. The leader should be able to help the group "start with the end in mind" (Covey, 1989), while being attentive to every step along the journey. (Yolande, Final paper, 1107, 2001)

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